DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 447 708 FL 026 486

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TITLE	School Policies and Practices as Roadblocks to Academic Success.
PUB DATE	2000-03-18
NOTE	9p.; Paper presented at the Spring Conference of the National Council of Teachers of English (New York, NY, March 18, 2000).
PUB TYPE	Reports - Evaluative (142) -- Speeches/Meeting Papers (150)
EDRS PRICE	MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	*English (Second Language); High School Students; High Schools; Interviews; Limited English Speaking; Participant Observation; Second Language Instruction; Second Language Learning; *Teacher Qualifications; *Track System (Education); *Underachievement
IDENTIFIERS	Content Area Teaching

ABSTRACT

This brief paper (a 9-page copy of remarks delivered at the panel) was presented as part of a panel on identifying the factors that impede the academic success of English language learners. It is a descriptive study of the students at a large public high school (2,300 students with an English-as-a-Second-Language (ESL) population of 50) in central Pennsylvania. Two areas that affect students' academic success focused on in this paper are the absence of teacher certification in bilingual ESL education in Pennsylvania and the tendency to place English language learners in lower-track classes. Examples of these phenomena are described in some detail and followed by explanations of how and why negative consequences occur for the learners. One reference, a previous article by the author, is included. (KFT)

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School Policies and Practices as Roadblocks to Academic Success

by

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paper presented as part of the panel session:

Critical Impositions: Identifying Factors that Impede the Academic Success of English Language Learners

The Spring Conference of the National Council of Teachers of English
March 18, 2000
New York City

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NCTE Spring Conference, 3/18/00, New York City

School Policies and Practices as Roadblocks to Academic Success

The title of my paper is "School Policies and Practices as Roadblocks to Academic Success." The information presented is based on a qualitative case study at a public high school in central Pennsylvania (see Sharkey and Layzer, forthcoming). The overall student population was approximately 2300, the ESL population was approximately 50 students. In 1993, the federal department of education named Mountain High a Blue Ribbon School, one of the top 200 secondary schools in the country.

I am using the term "academic success" to refer to the achievement of or progress towards students' stated career goals. For example, two seniors Nam Hee, the daughter of a visiting professor from Korea, and Veronique, an immigrant refugee from Rwanda, were planning on attending college, so I tried to understand how school polices and practices helped or hindered their progress towards these career goals. (All student and teacher names are pseudonyms.)

In the short amount of time I have today, I'd like to focus on two areas that affect students' academic success. The first is the absence of teacher certification in bilingual/ESL education in Pennsylvania, and the second is the tendency to place English language learners in lower-track classes.

Lack of teacher certification in bilingual/ESL education

Pennsylvania does not have teacher certification in ESL/bilingual education. The state department of education conducted a survey of 241 school districts in Pennsylvania and concluded that the survey data "did not reveal a need for ESL certification among the surveyed school districts" (George Shevelin, Director, Bureau of Teacher Certification and Preparation, personal communication). What this means is that schools can hire teachers (certified in other subject areas) who do not have formal educational background in second language teaching and learning. This was the case at Mountain High, where for the past twenty years, certified teachers who professed an interest in working with English language learners got the job of ESL teacher. Three

years ago, Mountain High hired Tom, a social studies teacher, to teach transitional ESL and social studies ESL based on his interest in international students. Tom's father, a university professor, often welcomed visiting faculty and students into his home; Tom's mother has been a volunteer ESL tutor in the high school for over twenty years. However, Tom has no educational background in second language teaching and learning. It is difficult to imagine Mountain High, which prides itself on its academic reputation, hiring an English teacher "who liked chemists" to teach chemistry. We have to ask ourselves if 50 White, middle-class students, wanted to take AP chemistry, if the school would hire that English teacher to do the job. And, if the school did hire the under qualified teacher, how would the parents of these students respond?

Observing Tom's classes and his interactions with the students, two things stand out: the first is that Tom cares deeply about the English language learners. He jokes with the students, and the good-spirited teasing goes both ways. Second, the students love Tom. They call out to him in the hall or when he enters the classroom (during study period), they hang around his desk at the end of the school day.

However, upon closer examination, another important issue emerges. Tom's social studies ESL classes do not attend to academic proficiency. According to Tom, the purpose of the ESL program is to get the students "comfortable using the language" and the scope and objectives of the social studies ESL course is to "explain what it means to be an American." During the 1998-99 school year, Tom was struggling to develop the content for the ESL social studies class. He relied heavily on E.D. Hirsch's "Everything your fifth grader needs to know" and "Everything your sixth grader needs to know." Tom's curriculum focused on superficial content knowledge and conversational proficiency. Edouard, an immigrant refugee from Rwanda, who had transitioned out of the ESL program, was struggling with the reading assignments in his 10th grade world cultures class. When his scheduled permitted, Edouard would go to Tom's social studies ESL class just to be in a fun atmosphere, one where we felt comfortable and welcomed. One afternoon in December 1998, I was helping Edouard with this world cultures homework. He was worried about his grade. He said he was so behind because Americans take social studies classes since the

time they are in third grade and this was his first year with it. I asked him if he had taken ESL social studies. "Oh yes" he said. "But actually, we didn't learn anything in there" (fieldnotes 12/10/98).

As a teacher, I know to interpret such comments carefully. However, from my observations of Tom's classes and many conversations with him, I knew that there was some truth in Edouard's comment. Of course, he learned in Tom's class, but the point is that Tom's class did not help Edouard develop the academic skills and language necessary for his mainstream social studies classes.

Tom's influence goes beyond social studies. Because he is recognized by his fellow teachers as "one of the ESL teachers," several of them would often ask Tom's advice on how to best meet the needs of the English language learners in their classes. In an interview, Mrs. Daniels, a health teacher said

> I'm afraid to do anything wrong, I don't feel good doing things wrong, I don't like to hide but you know, I don't think I'm as effective with them [ELLs] as I would like to be but I would like to learn how. And as I said, Tom said anything you do, can't hurt them, don't worry about it, it can't hurt them, you're helping them much more. That's what I rely on as a defense mechanism (interview 5/18/99).

Ms. Kinski, a math teacher, also sought advice from Tom. He suggested following a routine, so the students would always know what to expect in class. She followed his advice and thought it worked out well.

My point with these two examples is that Tom has now been positioned as an expert. So his advice is being taken up by mainstream teachers.

Now, it is easy for transient researchers such as myself and other doctoral students, to point our fingers at Tom, shake our heads, and lay the burden of responsibility for the English language learners' academic success on his doorstep. However, I think Tom has been placed in a difficult situation. The lack of teacher certification in ESL/bilingual education sends the message that bilingual learners are not that important, that anybody who speaks English and is certified in

another subject area can design and implement curriculum appropriate for bilingual students. If the state marginalizes this area, it is easy for school districts to do the same. Yet, if English language learners do not have teachers who can help them develop their academic proficiency, it is more difficult for them to succeed academically. Therefore, I think the school administration and the state have to take more responsibility in providing English language learners with qualified teachers. Furthermore, the statistics about the changing demographics, about more and more students from homes where English is not the first language, is not new information. Colleges of education should be taking more responsibility in preparing teachers, all teachers, to understand the role of language in learning.

Lower track classes

My next area of focus is the placement of English language learners in lower track classes. The central question of the case study was to understand what helped or hindered the English language learners' access to academic success and resources. One significant finding was the practice of placing the ELLs in lower track classes. In the preliminary draft report of the study, I had written that it was a policy to place these students in lower track classes. Susan, the head ESL teacher corrected my assumption, stating "There is no policy regarding the placement of ELLs in lower track classes. It's pretty much and individual prescription. We always try to place them in a situation where they can succeed and where there is good chemistry" (written response 8/5/99). In response to my concern that the students seemed to be placed in those classes without full consideration of their academic aspirations, Susan stated that she and the school counselor do make such considerations, adding the caveat:

> Upon suggestion of the admissions officers at [local university], where most of our kids go to school, they [admissions personnel] feel it is better to have a higher grade on the transcript than it is to have a 'college bound' course with a lower grade, hence the lower placement. It is always with the student's approval that this is done [written response, 8/5/99].

I believe that Susan is sincere in her concern for doing what she feels is best for the students. However, I think she might be underestimating the weight that her advice carries with students and their parents, especially those who are unaccustomed to questioning teachers' knowledge and are unfamiliar with the consequences of being placed in lower track classes.

Here are some teachers' descriptions of the lower track classes:

- "Earth Science is for the regular kids; general kids, [who] are not going to go to college, but need the unit to pass high school" [Mr. Szymanski, interview, 5/7/99].
- "What you end up seeing [in World Cultures]is the interested students take advanced and the non-motivated students take regular" [Ms. Giles, interview, 5/6/99].
- "English 12 [is] basically your lowest level kids, kids who have a history of failure...obviously most of them are not planning on going to college...there's nowhere else for them to go really...there's nowhere else to put them and they have to have English, so that's why they are in there" [Ms. Federoff, interview, 5/7/99].

However, in these three classes we found six English language learners who were planning to go to college. In fact, the three ELLs in Ms. Federoff's class had already been accepted to college at the time of this study. In the English 12 class that we observed and that Ms. Federoff described as "typical," she was explaining the students' next project: to make a puppet show based on children's books. During the summer, we ran into Véronique, who had been in English 12 and was currently enrolled in college summer courses. She was finding both the quantity and level of reading to be very difficult; her comments indicated that she was unprepared for college reading.

Here is how teachers talked about students in "regular" classes:

- They have learning disabilities, or learning support, a lot of emotional support kids, so you end up with behavior becoming a real issue" [Ms. Giles, interview, 5/6/99].

The following excerpt from the interview with Mr. Szymanski captures the situation and the academic consequences of placing ELLs in lower track classes.

Mr. S: I find that those [ESL] kids are a heck of a lot more motivated than anybody else in my class, especially the general class. And they always put them in the general class, too. Well, I don't know if that's a good place to put them.

Judy: Why?

Mr. S: [after mentioning the learning support and special needs students] So, when you get a mix like that, who gets slided as far as most kids? It would be the ESL kids because I have to worry about everybody else in class. Those kids are never any problem most of the time. I just feel it's a disservice to those kids. They need to be, I hate to say it, they need to be all in one room until they learn the language and then split them up. After they have some idea of what's going on. And most of them are smart, and they shouldn't be in that Earth Science class. They should be in Earth Science I [the advanced class].

Judy: So, then if you're in Earth Science I, it's easier to get into other science classes later?

Mr. S: Yeah, Earth Science I then you can go to Biology I, then you can take second-year classes, a semester of meteorology, semester of microbiology--if you're going into biology and stuff like this, in this school. And if you're in the general track, unless they really learn their English and then do something the following year to show somebody that they can do higher level work, they're are not going to do higher level work [interview, 5/7/99].

The teachers' comments were corroborated by classroom observations, where in the regular level courses, teachers focused more on classroom management--keeping students on task, and "selling" the course content. It was more common for a few vocal students to dominate the classroom space, sometimes physically--constantly roaming, roving, touching. In contrast, in the advanced level courses, students in group work stayed on task longer, and teachers spent more time attending to content questions. In Advanced World Cultures II, students were offered opportunities to decide which task to work on. Ms. Kinski, a math teacher, noted that the lowest track math class had so little language that verbal explanations were often left out or severely limited [interview, 5/14/99].

The English language learners are placed in lower track classes based on the assumption that the reduced linguistic challenge is a benefit. Instead, it is doubly harmful. The reduced language of one-word answers and hunt and find exercises typical of these classes restricts the students' language development, and being in lower track classes diminishes their opportunities to pursue certain academic paths. The lack of an academic focus in the ESL program at Mountain High only exacerbates the problem.

Traditionally, the research literature in second language acquisition theory has emphasized language learning as an individually-mediated activity. Learners who are motivated, succeed. Those who don't succeed are labeled lazy or cognitively deficient. Thus, the social contexts in which learners find themselves are perceived as neutral non-factors. As teachers, administrators, and researchers, we have to work together in analyzing social contexts for all learners, but especially bilingual learners. I hope this short paper has demonstrated how state policies and school practices can work as unnecessary roadblocks to students' academic success.

References

Sharkey, J. and Layzer, C. (forthcoming). Whose definition of success? Identifying factors that affect English language learners' access to academic success. *TESOL Quarterly, 34* (2).